

“Joy in a Time of Despair”

2 Corinthians 9:6-15 (NRSV)

The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a joyful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. As it is written,

*“God scatters abroad, God gives to the poor;
God’s righteousness endures forever.”*

The One who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that God has given you. Thanks be to God for this indescribable gift!

“For God loves a joyful giver,” writes the apostle Paul.

Indeed, there is joy in giving, as we have been hearing in our wonderful Stewardship faith stories this month, and as we witnessed with those very shiny pennies just a few moments ago. And indeed, I believe that our joy brings delight to God’s heart.

But if we are honest, and if we are paying attention, there are things about this world that can make us feel a long way from joyful.

The news yesterday from Pittsburgh, where worshipers gathered just as we are today were gunned down in a devastating act of anti-Semitic hate and evil...

The news earlier this week that the administration is attempting to strip civil rights, protections, and even basic recognition from our transgender siblings, who are already among the most vulnerable in our nation...

The news from Mexico of thousands of people leaving home to journey on foot for thousands of miles, across mountains and deserts, carrying their babies in tired arms or on aching backs, developing blisters and sunburns, risking kidnap or worse, because staying at home would be even more desperate, and being met not with compassion from their neighbors to the north but with xenophobia and racism...

The news that filters out more slowly, more locally, passed by word of mouth from friend to friend, of another young person losing their life to addiction...

The reality of food insecurity and poverty that afflicts so many people in our communities, leaving kids going to school hungry and parents trying to decide between paying for heat, buying diapers, or putting gas in the car so they can get to work...

The aching absence that follows the death of a loved one, the grief and sorrow and loneliness that threaten to engulf those who survive...

If we are honest, and if we are paying attention, there are things about this world that can make us feel a long way from joyful.

But in these moments, here is where there is joy, or if not joy, then some form of solace: in knowing that we can be part of doing something about it. In these moments, I find joy, or if not joy, then some form of solace and power, in being part of a community like this one, a community that responds with care and compassion and love and commitment to all the pain of the world.

In the face of a rising tide of anti-Semitism and other hateful speech and actions, we ask, “Who is my neighbor?” and we build relationships with Temple B’nai Shalom in Putnam, with neighbors from the Islamic Center in Storrs, with the Greater Putnam Interfaith Council, and beyond. We reach across the bounds of geography and denomination to offer our prayers and solidarity to neighbors near and far.

In the face of attacks on our transgender and gender-nonconforming kin, we reaffirm our Open & Affirming identity and host second hours to educate ourselves about how to be better allies to our trans* friends.

In the face of anti-immigrant rhetoric, we continue to cherish the Biblical mandate to care for the stranger and foreigner by supporting the Quiet Corner Refugee Resettlement Project, which has so far resettled two Syrian families who fled the ongoing civil war in their homeland and have built new lives for themselves here in Connecticut.

In the face of addiction and mental health crises, we provide space for AA and other support groups where folks find their way toward wholeness and healing, one day, one meeting, at a time.

In the face of hunger, both physical and spiritual, in our community, we host our Community Kitchen lunch every Monday at noon—a joyful gathering if ever there was one, complete with bingo, and live bluegrass, and a comedy show, and a good meal, and laughter, and conversation, and singing “Happy Birthday,” and bread and produce to take home when you go.

In the face of loneliness and grief, our Parish Care teams send cards and make phone calls and pay visits, and our memorial service reception team puts on amazing spreads of food, and our congregation offers quiet, compassionate care to one another in so many life-giving ways.

In all these ways, to be a part of this community is to say a defiant “no” to the narratives of fear and division and scarcity that threaten to overtake us, and to say a powerful “yes” to God’s ways of plenty and unity and love. There is joy, or if not joy, then some form of solace, in knowing that we can be part of doing something to change the narrative and respond to the world’s pain in a constructive, hopeful way.

And there is a deeper joy, too: the joy that comes when we are able to maintain our center amidst the storm and wind and devastating tragedies. The joy that comes when we are able to notice beauty even in the midst of pain and injustice. The joy that comes when we are seen and known by a loving community and by God. The joy that comes when we stay attuned to the presence of God, to the power of Love, to the Light no darkness can overcome.

Because here is what is true. Even when the world makes us feel a long way from joyful... even when joy feels out of reach, inaccessible, absent entirely... even when the news seems to get worse with every passing day... even when the clouds gather and the shadows deepen and the powers of sin and death seem to have won... our faith promises that though weeping endures for the night, joy will come in the morning. God is always present, always working, always moving us and this world toward wholeness, toward wellness, toward joy, toward love. This is true whether or not we can see it, whether or not we can feel it, whether or not we can bring ourselves to believe it—because even when I can’t see it, one of you can. Even when you can’t feel it, someone sitting in the next pew can. Even when you can’t bring yourself to believe it, God believes in you. And so we carry each other, and God carries us, through the valley of the shadow and beyond.

Friends, don’t you want to be part of that?